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ABSTRACT

Classical studies have value for all students and particular benefits for gifted students at all educational levels. A gradual retrenchment of formal, philological classical studies in elementary and secondary schools and universities has taken place in the last four decades. Once traditional Latin and Greek were dropped, however, many colleges recognized disadvantages faced by students lacking such training, especially those studying the arts; these colleges reinstituted classical civilization courses to provide the necessary background. The study of Latin and Greek, as with any other language, can enhance personality development through a broader awareness of another culture. Translation is a creative activity that heightens one's sensitivity to language structure and thereby improves one's communicative abilities. Also significant is the employment of classical studies at a lower, nonliterary level. Through the Foreign Language in Elementary School program, introduced in 1966, basic Latin instruction was begun in elementary schools. Test results showed that English reading scores of students who took any foreign language were significantly higher than those who took none. Additionally, English reading scores of students with one year of Latin instruction were higher than those who were in their fourth year of Spanish or French. (VW)

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CLASSICS FOR THE GIFTED : EVALUATION

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EVALUATION

A V VAN STEKELENBURG

1. INTRODUCTION

Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis. A classicist may, I hope, be excused for opening his contribution to a conference on the gifted with a Latin quotation, hoping that he will be understood. But even if the latter is not the case this classicist will not be shocked too much because, as the above quotation says: "times change and we change with them".
It is more than a century ago that a British statesman declared that the sole purpose of all education ought to be to enable children to read the Greek and Roman authors in the original. I may assure you that this attitude is unlikely to be found any more in any part of the Western world today. As for today's politicians this may come as no surprise, but I think I may also be as categorical on behalf of today's classicists, no matter how attractive this outdated conception of education might be to them from a mere pecuniary point of view. The modern classicist realises fully that the world we live in is one for which the study of Homer, Vergil, Ovid and Cicero alone cannot give adequate and sufficient preparation. The enormous growth of science and the changes in our world, political, economic and social, require skills which the classical authors cannot be expected to provide.

2. THE CHANGED POSITION OF THE CLASSICS

The past four decennia have witnessed two seemingly contradictory but in fact complementary developments as regards Graeco-Roman studies.

2.1 On the one hand a gradual retrenchment of formal, philological classical studies at both school and university level has taken place. Latin as a prerequisite for medical studies was already abolished in many Western countries before the Second World War. Nowadays it is also possible in most countries to get a university degree in Law, History or Modern Languages without having taken Latin (and/or Greek) as a subject at school or university.

The main reason for this development was the preoccupation with the present and the future which characterised the mood after the war. By many it was felt that the brave new world owed little or nothing to the past and that that unhappy era - a period of class discrimination, colonialism and wars fought by misguided peoples to the advantage of politicians and capitalists -

only deserved to be forgotten. The fascinating advance of science strengthened this disdain for the useless past while creating overheated expectations for the future. In the field of education this new philosophy was, of course, especially translated into action by the many "Socialist", "Labour" or "Democratic" governments that were and are in office for prolonged periods.

The Classics formed a natural and prime target for the reformers and utilitarians. Their image was that of a mere mental adornment, of no practical use, employed for centuries by the upper classes as a tool for class discrimination. To change this, school curricula were altered, new types of schools without any classical education were created, and Latin and Greek were dropped as prerequisites for more and more studies at university level, with the conservative opposition clamouring that the Goths were at the gate.[1)]

To a degree the professional classicists themselves were to blame for the bad image of their field of study. Snug and comfortable they had taken the security of their profession for granted for too long and had not taken heed of the changes in the world around them. It was difficult for them to see that their mainly linguistic approach had become too narrow and that an ability to read Greek and Latin - quickly lost if not steadily practised - was in itself not a justification for the hard work and costly time they demanded from their pupils and students. When the crunch came and the classicists were rudely awakened to face the changed reality, many of them had difficulty in motivating the claims of their subject against the onslaught of utilitarianism and egalitarianism. Their argument that translation from Greek and Latin was as good a mental training as mathematics, and therefore offered as good a preparation for the modern era, was brushed aside by psychologists and educationists with the argument of "intransferability of training".

2.2 The second development may be seen as a reaction to the one already described. When during the sixties more and more students without any classical education entered the Universities, the disadvantages of this situation soon made themselves felt, especially in the Arts faculties. Then was rediscovered what seemed to have been forgotten because it had been taken for granted for so long, that:

- few areas of European civilization can be satisfactorily understood and effectively studied without taking the Graeco-Roman factor into account.
- especially the study of European art in all its forms (literature, fine and applied arts) and of all periods (including the 20th century) can

only ignore the classical tradition at its peril.

Many colleges and universities have since instituted courses in Classical Civilization which enable students to study Greek and Roman literature in translation and ancient history, art and philosophy with the minimum requirements - or none - as to the languages. Professional classicists have taken the new challenge in their stride. Many new translations of the most important classical authors in a modern idiom have seen the light during the last 20 or 30 years.[2] A veritable avalanche of books on ancient history, mythology and art, especially written for the non-initiated, has already been published. The enormous demand that exists for this type of book is borne out by the fact that it will be difficult to find a bookshop in the United States, Europe or South Africa which does not stock several books on different aspects of classical civilization.

Simultaneously the new situation at educational institutions where the classical languages were still being taught required new textbooks and methods in order to make optimum use of the generally reduced time allowed for the subject. This has resulted in a great number of excellent methods that are a far cry from the previous ones which had often elevated grammar to an end in itself. The modern approach is to make the student read authentic literature as soon as possible.[3]

3. CLASSICS FOR THE GIFTED

3.1 Learning to read Greek and/or Latin

It would mean re-erecting the old image of the classics as an élitist subject if we were to state that classical studies are especially suited for the intellectually gifted, as "a privilege for only the best" as Winston Churchill once said. Nothing could be less our intention. The development of the personality and stimulation of inborn talents is as important for the average person as it is for the gifted, though society may expect to reap the best fruits from her most promising saplings.

From the point of view of personality development the study of a foreign language, any language, can never be called a waste of time. To enter a world different from one's own in some or many aspects, to be enabled to communicate with another society either through personal contact or through its literature, enhances not only one's ability to communicate but also one's understanding of and tolerance for other peoples. It makes it possible to see one's own society in perspective and to "de-absolutize" one's own criteria and values.

The value of the study of Latin and Greek should be measured with the same criteria as that of other languages. And then it will be found that their educational value is just as high as that of modern languages - if not higher. The precondition is that they must be properly taught. They must be used to open up the two civilizations from which Western culture developed. The student must be enabled to gain first-hand experience of the people who are to a large degree his cultural forefathers. He must be made aware to observe the first European experiments with life and society, and to see the emergence of important concepts like fate, providence and the freedom and responsibility of the individual. All the while he must be brought to relate his newly acquired knowledge to the conditions and opinions of his own, modern world. Only then can classical literature become relevant to him.

The fact that in the classics the foreign and the familiar coincide make them an even more valuable experience. On the one hand the student makes contact with a society which is removed from his own in time and content. On the other hand he will recognise much that is familiar and that will help him to place his own civilization in historical perspective and so strengthen his sense of cultural identity.

Greek and Latin literature are eminently suited for an in-depth study of the societies that produced them because of their social and political (in the widest sense) character. Literature was a social affair, written for a large public and always against the background of society to the extent of often being nationalistic. At the same time the fact that the Greek and Roman world no longer exist - are "dead" in the terminology generally used, though it would be better to say that they are "eternalised" - makes it possible for us to study them under "laboratory conditions" as it were, where issues run less risk of becoming emotionally clouded. We are thus in a position to study the Graeco-Roman era as a prolonged experiment in humanity of which all the reports - lavishly illustrated - are still there for us to study, to learn from and to comment upon.

The educational value of reading great literature does not have to be argued. Neither is this the place to convince anyone that Homer, Vergil, Horace or Ovid deserve to be ranked among the great writers. More to the point is the question whether real enjoyment of literature in a foreign language is possible at any but the highest level of training. It certainly is not within easy reach and much depends upon the quality of

teaching. But literature can be selected according to degrees of difficulty and there are nowadays many modern editions with excellent and relevant literary commentary which go a long way towards giving even the not-so-advanced student a first-hand experience of the earliest masterpieces of European literature.

As for the actual activity of translating from a foreign language the advantages for intellectual and personality development are obvious. The introduction of a person to a completely new medium of verbal expression cannot but enlarge his or her mental horizon. Good translation is always a creative activity that heightens one's sensitivity to language structure and is thus likely to improve one's communicative abilities. The idiosyncrasies of Greek and Latin make this especially valid for translating from these two languages. It cannot be denied that the challenge of the conciseness of Greek, and even more so of Latin, the discipline of analyzing the complex "classical" sentence, the activity of having to evaluate and to choose from several possibilities and finally the decision how to express it idiomatically in a quite different medium - the mother tongue - is a most valuable mental exercise. This challenge does not exist - or only to a far less degree - in modern Western languages because of the great similarity of their structures. The old argument in favour of Greek and Latin, that they develop abstract thinking and reasoning abilities, therefore still holds good though it should never be used in isolation.

3.2 CLASSICS FOR CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

Maybe the most interesting development in classical studies has taken place at a lower, non-literary level. It began in the United States where, in the early sixties, many communities began a FLES (Foreign Language in Elementary School) programme. In 1966 Dr. Judith B. LeBovit became Director of the Department of Foreign Languages of the Public Schools of the District of Columbia. At that time a pervasive notion in educational circles was that the way to uplift the underprivileged and disadvantaged and to give equal opportunities to all children was to bring down the intellectual niveau at schools. Dr. LeBovit was convinced that this could only result in the perpetuation of cultural deprivation and she began, inter alia, a vigorous campaign to revive the teaching of Latin with new textbooks and new educational goals. The reports on the results of basic Latin instruction on English reading skills were so impressive that within 6 years after the programme had started (in 1966) 111 of the District's 120 elementary schools were participating or had requested to be

allowed to participate. The test results showed again and again that:

- the English reading scores of students who had taken any foreign language in the elementary schools were significantly higher than the scores of students who had taken no foreign language.
- the English reading scores of students who had taken Latin for only one year were higher than the scores of students who were in their fourth year of Spanish or French instruction.[5)]

Hundreds of communities throughout the United States have now initiated Latin programmes in the elementary schools.

From the FLES programme a whole new approach towards teaching Latin evolved. Because the aim was not to read Latin literature but to improve the pupils' general language skills and cultural awareness all the modern methods in foreign language teaching were put to use. The approach was to a large degree thematic and emphasis was laid on the use of multisensory aids: slides, films, tapes, transparencies, games, comic strips. In this way the classics have become big business in the United States.

Programmes and projects such as those used in the FLES programme can be tuned in on any intellectual level. It is easy to manipulate their degree of difficulty and therefore they are extremely useful in education for the gifted. Such programmes can be part of a regular course in Latin or be made into an independent course ("classical culture/civilization"). They can easily be built into existing language, history or other courses. They can also be used as projects for the individual.

The possibilities are endless. Etymology - archaeology of the mind - can be practised with the aid of only a Latin dictionary and a newspaper. The digging up of the origins of words like transmit, transport, Transkei (and Transvaal), patient, pastoral or duplicate inevitably leads to language enrichment and improved verbal aptitude. It also gives the child the satisfaction of discovery, that great reward for work and important stimulus for further study. Etymology stimulates the imagination while the new awareness of wordroots, prefixes, suffixes and how they combine to form words improves the child's ability to analyse and think logically.

A host of projects can be derived from classical culture to enrich existing school subjects like history, modern languages, speech and drama, music (with dance), geography and even mathematics. The lives and discoveries of Archimedes or Pythagoras may be studied. A project can contain a study of the ingenious methods used by Eratosthenes to calculate the circumference of the earth and by Thales to calculate the height of a pyramid.

The universe according to Claudius Ptolemy whose ideas survived him by more than a thousand years can be another. The origins of the names of the constellations offer a vast field of exploration and an introduction into Greek mythology. The principal facts can be gleaned from encyclopaedias and general books on the history of mathematics, geography and astronomy. Sport can be enriched by individual or group research into the events of the original Olympic games. Ancient tactics used in javelin throwing or jumping may be studied from illustrations on hundreds of Greek vases. "Authentic" Olympic games may be organised. Part two (Some Practical Strategies) will set out what more can be done and how to do it.

NOTES

1. Changes in classical education did, of course, vary in extent and time of implementation. What is said here applies, however, in general to most Western European countries that still counted a traditional type of school with Greek and/or Latin as part of their educational system. For the United States cf. inter alia: F.L. Moreland (ed.), *Strategies in teaching Greek and Latin - Two Decades of Experimentation*, The American Philological Association, 1981, p. 1-4; J.C. Douglas Marshall, *The classics in American education*, The Classical Outlook, vol, 53, 1976, p. 88-90. For Australia: R.G. Tanner, *The classics in Australia*, Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, vol. 57, 1971, p. 310-320.

2. The most widely used English translations are those of The Penguin Classics with almost a hundred titles, most of which have appeared since 1960.

3. The one that is best known and most widely used is the Cambridge Latin Course which saw its first impression in 1970. For other newly developed methods see part two of this article (2). Also J.E. Sharewood Smith, *On Teaching Classics*, London, 1977 and F.L. Moreland, *o.c.*

4. The eloquent Dr. J.B. LeBovit (*The teaching of Latin in the elementary and secondary schools - A handbook for educators and administrators*, Washington, D.C., 1976, p. 130-131) expresses herself rather strongly:

"The current psychological climate to which I refer has armed some of these barbarians with sophisticated weapons. The fashionable criticism of language teaching today is that it is an "elitist" endeavor that is out of place in the "democratic-egalitarian" culture of the future. We are told that training in the "standard" literary language--English as well as foreign--is an undemocratic idea that violates the cultural personality of students who come from a racial or an ethnic minority, from a rural group, from an urban lower socioeconomic class, or from whatever part of the population can be singled

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out as exploited. The barbarians tell us that our schools have no right to impose linguistic norms of the "dominant classes" upon the student body as a whole--that such an imposition of linguistic norms is a criminal offense, an obliteration of the spontaneously acquired patterns of living, everyday speech, which only the school system has arbitrarily classified as substandard.

This "democratic-egalitarian-populist" approach is justified only to the extent that the school as well as the individual teacher has a natural obligation to honor each student's native speech and not to regard it with fault-finding, critical denigration. No student should ever be made to feel inferior because of the way in which he speaks. But it would be a fatal mistake to reason from this moral obligation as human beings to the fact that school language teaching must confine itself within the parameters of colloquial speech. Schools cannot begin to fulfill their most elementary educational missions without using our heritage of the entire range of linguistic expression, which includes, first and foremost, standard written language and its different applications in many fields.

The barbarians mistakenly and dangerously assume that schools can contribute to the "liberation" of disadvantaged and exploited groups by dropping the "elitist" norms of standard written and literary language. But the truth is exactly the reverse: exclusion from the circuit of standard literate and literary communication only aggravates and perpetuates alienation into "minority" or "disadvantaged" groups, into "lower" social, cultural, and economic positions. Far from violating the "cultural personality" of the student, the acquisition of literate and literary language liberates and enriches it. This rejection of literate and literary culture, while masquerading as a progressive, popular attitude, is in fact a deeply reactionary trend. Let us hope that it will prove no more important than a passing vogue, though we must fight it with our own ammunition--educational passing vogues that masquerade as important truths are far more threatening than passing vogues in dress, interior decorating, or best-selling fiction and movies".

5. The full report is in LeBovit, *o.c.*, p. 61-86. Reports from other communities: Nancy A. Mavrogenes, *The Effects of Elementary Latin Instruction on Language Arts Performance*, Elementary School Journal, vol. 77, number 4, 1977, The University of Chicago; *A White Paper on Latin and the Classics for Urban Schools*, The American Classical League, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, 1977.